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WHY RYAN ZINKE'S PLAN TO RAISE ENTRANCE FEES TO NATIONAL PARKS WILL DO LITTLE TO ACTUALLY BENEFIT NATIONAL PARKS

The secretary of the interior wants to raise user fees at the national parks. His proposal will hurt all but the wealthiest Americans, and it won't work.

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Ryan Zinke likes to play the role of the tough and independent westerner—a blue-collar cowboy with a big hat, a gaudy belt, and some backcountry swagger. But Zinke's act is just that—a well-staged performance. The truth is, the secretary of the interior is a man with a \$100,000 art collection, a penchant for private jets, and a slew of real estate investments. Though he's the least wealthy member of President Donald Trump's cabinet, he's still a supporting player in the most plutocratic administration in White House history. And his policies show it.

On October 24th, Zinke's National Park Service announced it is considering drastic increases to entrance fees at some of the most popular parks in America. If implemented, visitors at places like Grand Teton, Glacier, Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Zion may soon be required to pay as much as \$70 per person for access to these publicly owned spaces. Zinke claimed at the time of the announcement that the proposed fee hike would help fix the NPS's \$12 billion deferred maintenance backlog.

"The infrastructure of our national parks is aging and in need of renovation and restoration," he said. "Targeted fee increases at some of our most-visited parks will help ensure that they are protected and preserved in perpetuity." The agency estimates that a fee hike of this magnitude will raise about \$70 million in revenue each year.

In truth, though, this exorbitant fee increase is not about fixing infrastructure—after all, if the Trump administration were really serious about repairing the dilapidated trails and bridges and buildings on our public lands it wouldn't have put forward a 2018 budget proposal that aims to cut NPS discretionary funding by 13 percent and lay off more than 1,200 full-time staffers at the agency. (Zinke has publicly defended these bone-deep cuts.)

No, user fee increases are meant to accomplish something else entirely. Championed by libertarian think tanks and anti-conservation politicians, they are a favored right-wing policy meant to shift responsibility for park and forest financing away from the public purse and toward private individuals. By enabling further budget cuts and forcing public agencies to rely on theme park-style admission fees to fund their operations, such policies slowly transform public interest institutions into pseudo-commercial enterprises.

Last March, in a hearing before the House Natural Resources Committee, user fee advocates traveled to Capitol Hill to promote their cause. Like Zinke and his lobbyist-stacked Department of the Interior, these advocates represent very special interests.

Consider the Property and Environment Research Center, whose director spoke at the hearing. A small but powerful think tank based in Bozeman, Montana, the organization has taken more than \$130,000 from funding sources backed by the billionaire Koch brothers and their political allies in the last 10 years alone. And its top officer, Reed Watson, is a former employee of the Koch Family Foundations.

During his testimony at the hearing, Watson claimed the expanded user fees are meant to "unshackle our national parks and forests from the counterproductive dependency on congressional appropriations...."

Watson seems to be saying, in other words, that Congress should no longer be the chief custodian of the public lands that rightfully belong to all 326 million Americans. His organization wants Congress to permanently authorize user fees at public lands across the country, including on Forest Service properties where such fees do not yet exist. That's a blueprint for disaster.

Most troubling is the fact that increased dependency on user fees will price out working class people, young people, and others from America's public lands. It undercuts the popular potential of our parks and forests.

"This is limiting access for people," says Raúl Grijalva, the ranking Democrat on the House Natural Resources Committee. "It is a direct attack on lower-income Americans and communities of color."

Ethics aside, there's also a feasibility issue: User fees simply cannot provide enough funding to fix the maintenance backlog problem. Only the federal government has the wherewithal to do that, through large-scale investment in the land management agencies.

During the same hearing on Capitol Hill last March, Denis Galvin, a former deputy director of the NPS, made it a point to remind all in attendance that the United States has indeed suffered through issues of public lands infrastructure (or a lack thereof) in the past. Specifically, he spoke about Mission 66.

By the end of World War II, the national parks were in a state of severe neglect. They required a major influx of federal funds if their maintenance woes were to be adequately addressed. And that's exactly what the Eisenhower administration did with its Mission 66 initiative: It dedicated roughly \$1 billion over a decade to fixing and improving the dilapidated park system and preparing it for the second half of the 20th century.

Mission 66 was a smashing success, funding more than 100 new visitor centers across the park system, new water and sewer systems, many miles of new road, and much-needed trail repairs. It also funded the construction of new parks across the country.

"It was a time when the nation had the confidence to do the things that needed to be done and to put up the money to do it and to stick with it until it was done," Galvin tells me. "It was a great success."

Galvin believes that fixing the maintenance backlog problem would require a similar level of federal commitment: a program that dedicates roughly \$1 billion a year over 10 years to repair and improve the trails, roads, bridges, and buildings on the federal domain.

The NPS maintenance backlog "is a multi-billion dollar problem," Galvin says. "\$70 million a year [from increased user fees] isn't going to help."

